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Board to oversee \$2.75 million

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Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — The Lincoln County commissioners on Wednesday approved a nine-member board to manage a \$2.75 million settlement for asbestos-related health care.

The settlement between W.R. Grace & Co. and the Environmental Protection Agency resolved an access dispute over Grace-controlled properties in the Libby area. The money is aimed at paying for health-care needs not met by Grace's existing medical plan for victims of asbestos-related disease.

The terms of the settlement require the money to be managed by a nonprofit corporation. About two dozen people attended a Feb. 18 meeting called by the commissioners to discuss forming a corporation.

A follow-up meeting was held on Feb. 21, and a list of 15 potential board members was submitted to the commissioners on Monday.

The group submitting the list recommended a seven-member board as a first choice and a nine-member board as a second choice. The group also recommended that three alternate board members be selected.

The nine board members approved by the commissioners on Wednesday are Jeff Regh, owner of B&G Electric; John Johanson, vice president of First National Bank; Marcia Fantozz, operations manager at Libby Clinic; Gary Spencer, vice president of Glacier Bank; LeRoy Thom, a former Grace employee, owner of Montana Machine & Fabrication and a member of the Community Advisory Group and the Center for Asbestos Related

Disease advisory board; Carol Alsbury, social services director at Libby Care Center; Diane Rewerts, a Libby schoolteacher; Don Smith, a Burlington Northern employee; and attorney Chuck Evans.

The terms of office and other details will be left to the board.

"All we're doing is appointing the board, and they'll have to do the rest," Commissioner Rita Windom said.

The commissioners approved spending up to \$2,000 of county money for legal expenses and filing fees to organize the corporation, with the stipulation that the county will seek reimbursement from the settlement money.

"I realize that they've got to have the money up front, but I think we've got to recover these costs," Commissioner Marianne

Roose said.

The settlement has been given preliminary approval by a federal judge in Missoula and has also been approved by a bankruptcy court. All that remains is for the paperwork to be resubmitted to the judge in Missoula for his signature.

Once that happens, there is a 10-day deadline for an existing nonprofit corporation approved by Grace and the EPA to accept the money; otherwise Grace is to appoint its own board.

The settlement agreement provides a broad definition of health benefits for which the money can be used.

Possibilities include continued screenings for people who have previously received negative or equivocal test results for asbestos-related disease, as well as various other medical expenses not met by Grace's health plan.